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Form and Meaning

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**Form and Meaning:
The Conventionalization of the Leaf
Ornament**

Kresten Jespersen

As did Owen Jones, Bloomer argues for a modern style of ornament to decorate a

modern architecture.

Based on formal laws rather than theories of classical or naturalist imitation, conventionalization can be seen as being explicitly modern.

Moreover, deriving from the work of ornament, these laws are dependent on intrinsic rather than extrinsic principles.

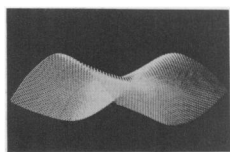
1. *Modern Painters*, vol. V, part viii, ch. 1, no. 1; in Kenneth Clark, *Ruskin Today* (London, 1964) p. 91, no. 82. I would like to thank Professor W. H. Jordy of Brown University for the basis of what is good about the arguments for conventionalization in Owen Jones, John Ruskin, and by extension Kent Bloomer. Professor Jordy ever kept Ruskin to the fore in his "Nineteenth Century Architecture," a course at Brown, and I have always been grateful to his insight and advice. Finally, I want to thank Professor Jordy for introducing me to Owen Jones' *The Grammar of Ornament* in 1975, which formed the core of my dissertation under him in 1984.

2. A. W. N. Pugin, *True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* (London, 1841), 23.

3. A. W. N. Pugin, *Floriated Ornament* (London, 1849), Intro.

4. Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art* (London, 1956), 105.

5. See Charles Handley-Read, "High Victorian Design," *Sixth Conference Report of the Victorian Society* (London, 1968), 23-27.



Anticlastic structure, diagrammatic model.



A. W. N. Pugin, wallpaper design.

Between the earth and man arose the leaf.
Between the heaven and man came the cloud.
His life being partly as the falling leaf,
and partly as the flying vapour.¹ John Ruskin

In the formal and the iconographic aspects of Kent Bloomer's leaf ornament conventionalization is a fundamental agenda. This agenda offers both continuity and novelty: continuity because the process of conventionalization is constantly being informed by the theory and practice of the past, and novelty because principles of form never dictate to representational style alone. Although entirely dependent on the historical principles of form and meaning, conventionalization escapes the 'visual' past. Since there is a margin of freedom in conforming to principles that cannot be found in conformity to visual appearance, conventionalization in Bloomer's ornament may suggest a new direction for ornamentalists and architects. Bloomer's strategy is one which searches for its justification in the past while creating an ornament that is new or modern. The tactic of seeking modernity through reference to principle rather than to fact, to visual 'truth,' will be explored in detail in this essay and constitutes the focus of its conclusion. Both historical ornament and the contemporary ornament of Kent Bloomer based on conventionalization argue for a different kind of modernism best described today as novel.

When Bloomer refers to the leaf as "the graphic or sculptural conventionalization of a plant form" it is to locate the leaf ornament in the philosophy of form generated by Victorian architects and theorists from A. W. N. Pugin to Louis Sullivan, and including John

Ruskin, Owen Jones, and William Morris. 'Conventionalization' as a theory and applied strategy in ornament preoccupied most of the nineteenth-century thinkers in ornament dedicated to botanic ornament in particular and to nature in general. It is Bloomer's commitment to the pedagogy of conventionalization which enriches his ornament in both formal and iconographic terms, where the iconography is in large measure supported by the intellectual heritage of the Victorians.

The 'conventional' qualities of Bloomer's ornament are foreshadowed in the two-dimensional yet anticlastic (saddle-like) aspects of his leaf, aspects which are derived from the multifaceted arguments advanced by the Victorians, who stressed truth to flatness, materials, and integrity of design. These truths, basically graphic in nature, were first broached by A. W. N. Pugin in his *True Principles* of 1841, where he argued against illusionism and the shadows upon which such conceits depended.² In his *Floriated Ornament* of 1849 Pugin was later to be more specific about the need for flatness when delineating botanic ornament:

"The Goths disposed the leaves and flowers of which their design was composed into geometrical forms and figures, carefully arranging the stems and component parts so as to fill up the space they were intended to enrich; and they were represented in such a manner as not to destroy the consistency of the particular feature or object they were employed to decorate, by merely imitative rotundity or shadow; for instance, a panel, which by its very construction is flat, would be ornamented by leaves or flowers drawn out or extended, so as to display their geometrical forms on a flat surface."³

This polemic for flatness was an essential contribution of Pugin to Victorian design, but the basis for overturning Renaissance and neoclassical illusionism lay deep in the British psyche, as Sir Nikolaus Pevsner has pointed out.⁴ What is important for conventionalization is that the flatness Pugin argued for in the ornament of leaves and flowers had its 'twin ideal' in 'geometric formalization.'⁵ Pugin typically imposed his geometry on the botanic image, whereas Bloomer allows the geometry to emerge from the golden section outlines of his leaf. Bloomer's geometry is natural to the leaf—the leaf is flat, and Bloomer makes sure that his leaf ornament remains flat. His veining of the leaf is more consciously geometric in the pergola *Tree Dome* at the World's Fair of 1984. For the *Tree Dome* Bloomer utilizes a cutout that is consciously architectural, eliminating the fractal



Kent Bloomer, Tree Domes, Louisiana World's Exposition, New Orleans, Louisiana, 1984, detail.

6.
Ralph J. Wornum,
Analysis of Design
(London, 1856), 15.

7.
Owen Jones,
The Grammar of Ornament
(London, 1856), 5.

8.
Ibid., 6.

9.
Ibid.

10.
Richard Redgrave,
Journal of Design and Manufacture,
III (London, 1848), 99.



Kent Bloomer, *Tree Domes*, leaf detail.

surface of the veining in favor of flatness by producing parallel voids on either side of the leaf's central vein, which is the only relief to an otherwise entirely flat aluminum surface. This stylization of the leaf ornament is in perfect accord with the definition of conventionalization of the Victorian librarian Ralph Wornum, who observed in his *Analysis of Design* of 1856 that "a plant is said to be conventionally treated when the natural order of its growth or development is disregarded."⁶ In Bloomer's leaf ornament, the asymmetry of the veining is disregarded in favor of symmetrical cutouts; this stylistic fillip conforms to the requirements of conventionalization in both Victorian and modern terms.

As we have seen so far, the issue of flatness and the twin issue of geometrical stylization converge in both Bloomer's ornament and in Victorian accounts of conventionalization. For both Bloomer and the Victorians however, conventionalization is rooted much deeper than this and extends to both formal and iconographic questions of modernity. To unravel the web of issues with any clarity two Victorians need to be discussed in some detail, as both have an immense bearing on our understanding of the formal issues on the one hand and the iconographic issues on the other. These Victorians are Owen Jones and John Ruskin.

PRINCIPLES OF FORM

Of all the architects of the nineteenth century, Owen Jones was the most concerned about matters of style in ornament. *The Grammar of Ornament* of 1856, the most important design encyclopedia of the nineteenth century, is primarily concerned with the genesis of a modern conventionalized style of ornament. Formal rather than iconographic issues preoccupied Owen Jones, and thirty-seven propositions in the *Grammar*, dealing with form and color, are the basis for this theory of conventionalization. The most important of these propositions deals with geometry: "all ornament should be based upon a geometrical construction (Proposition 8)";⁷ and nature: "Flowers or other natural objects should not be used as ornaments, but conventional representations founded upon them sufficiently suggestive to convey the intended image to the mind, without destroying the unity of the object they are employed to decorate. Universally obeyed in the best periods of art, equally violated when Art declines" (Proposition 13).⁸ The abstractive stylization of the flower and the leaf, which suggests their origination in nature without becoming imitatively representational, became the hallmark of High Victorian design. Both propo-

sitions accord more than one hundred years later with Bloomer's treatment of the leaf in his seminal *Tree Domes*.

More succinct and insightful of the relations of botany to ornamental design is the passage from the essay on "Leaves and Flowers from Nature," the twentieth and concluding chapter of the *Grammar*. There Jones writes:

"The single example of the chestnut leaf, Plate XCI, contains the whole of the laws which are to be found in Nature; no art can rival the perfect grace of its form, the perfect proportional distribution of the areas, the radiation from the parent stem, the tangential curvatures of the lines, or the even distribution of the surface decoration. We may gather this from a single leaf. But if we further study the law of their growth, we may see in an assemblage of leaves of the vine or the ivy, that the same law which prevails in the formation of the single leaf prevails also in the assemblage of leaves. As in the chestnut leaf . . . the area of each leaf diminishes in equal proportion as it approaches the stem, so in any combination of leaves each leaf is everywhere in harmony with the group; we never find a disproportionate leaf interfering to destroy the repose of the group."⁹

The culling from botany of laws of design directly applicable to ornament came some eight years after the cursory statement by Richard Redgrave, in the influential *Journal of Design and Manufacture*, where he observed that "every twig, leaf, flower, or seed, that falls our way, is a source of observation, a fund of new ideas."¹⁰ The 'new ideas' of Owen Jones stressed a parallel between the leaf in particular and ornament, built upon the formal characteristics which a new ornament

was expected to have, and which the “Creator has sown broad cast over the earth.”¹¹ The “kindling flower and shadowy leaf,”¹² as the more poetic John Ruskin notices, became for Jones a surrogate source for principles of form that could generate a modern style of ornament. It was precisely because of the modernism associated with conventionalization that Pugin earlier had been condemned for his ‘conventional’ churches.¹³ What was modern in Jones’ statement was not only the timeliness of his assertion, coming close on the heels of Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* of 1859, but also the formal character of ornament which he perceived in nature. I have insisted on the modernity of these formal statements because Bloomer’s leaf is so little dependent upon past ornamental forms and so aggressively modern, while keeping vital the very formal categories which Owen Jones saw in the botanical leaf.

The four radical principles which Jones found in the leaves of the chestnut, ivy, and vine were also seen to be operative as principles of design in Moorish ornament. These principles in variation are “the laws of equal distribution, radiation from a parent stem,

Tangential curvature of principal and secondary lines was followed by Bloomer in his leaf in particular and in the way he assembled the leaves of the *Tree Domes*. The cut-out veins of each leaf are set at tangential angles to the molded main vein of the leaf. At this juncture, Bloomer has insisted upon an architectural treatment of the vein, juxtaposing the single solid of the main vein and the multi-voids of the distributed or secondary veins. Because his leaf is set in a three-dimensional context as we find it in nature and not in a graphic medium as Jones so successfully demonstrated, Bloomer’s options are greater. Instead of juxtaposing secondary lines at a tangential angle to the principal internal line of the leaf, as does Jones, Bloomer has been able to draw upon a richer vocabulary of form while holding to the principle asserted by Jones as necessary for beauty and repose.

A variation of the solid and void strategy is employed by Bloomer and the architect Gerald Allen for their luminaire in Central Park, New York. It is important to see the lamp in its physical setting since there the elements of nature support Bloomer’s decision to make the swelling of the leaf on the ironwork depart at a tangential direction from the main lines of the frame. This is not the only important formal issue that the

11. Owen Jones, *The Grammar*, 157.

12. John Ruskin, *Praeterita*, vol. 1, ch II, no. 59; in Kenneth Clark, *Ruskin Today* (London, 1964), 117, no. 112.

13. Anon, “The Artistic Merit of Mr. Pugin,” *The Ecclesiologist*, new series 2 (London, 1846), 14-15.

14. Owen Jones, *The Grammar*, 69.



Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, 1856, chestnut leaf.

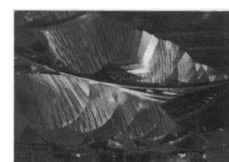
continuity of line, and tangential curvature, ever present in natural leaves.”¹⁴ To treat them in reverse order while examining Bloomer’s leaf ornament will be to insist in order on the increasing importance of these formal categories of style for Bloomer’s botanic ornament while simultaneously clarifying principles of art which Jones took to be nature’s principal message to ornament with respect to conventionalization.

lamp displays, but it is the most important and modern issue that the lamp reveals within the context of its conventionalization.

Crowned by a horizontal undulating line of iron, the lamp also recalls one of Jones’ favorite ornaments, the continuous stem, and echoes the principle of ‘continuity of line’ which Jones argued for in modern ornament. The stark abstraction at this point of the lamp is in sharp contrast to the budding leaves which turn upward and outward along the vertical ellipses that decorate the lower part of the design. Illustrative of this principle as well as the principle of ‘radiation from a parent stem,’ to which continuity of line is allied, is Owen Jones’ design for the



Owen Jones, leaf drawing.



Kent Bloomer, *Tree Domes*, leaf detail.

15.
See M. Darby,
The Islamic Perspective
(London, 1983), 112, No. 97.

16.
John Kresten Jespersen,
"Owen Jones"
The Grammar of Ornament:
Field Theory in Victorian Design at the Mid-
Century," Ph.D., diss. (Brown, 1984), 41,
84-94.

17.
See Bloomer and Moore,
Body, Memory & Architecture,
1, figs. 1, 2, 37. The illustrations clarify as
much as the text the grid conditions of
Descartes.

18.
See Andreas Speiser, *Die Theorie der Gruppen*
(Berlin, 1927). I am thankful to Professor Stew-
art of the mathematics department, Brown
University, for this source and the following
information on the mathematics of the field.
There are two ornamental motifs with no reflec-
tion; seven with reflection; two with 60° sym-
metries; three with 90° symmetries and three
with 120° symmetries—seventeen symmetry
operations in all. In the twentieth century only
two important studies on the mathematics of or-
nament have been made. In their article on
"Wallpaper and Atoms" M. J. Buerger and J. S.
Lukesh also point out that there are only seven-
teen symmetry operations which can be re-
peated by means of a "combined translation-
rotation movement." Buerger and Lukesh also
point out that only five diaper systems can be
found for patterns—see "Wallpaper and Atoms,"
The Technology Review (June, 1937, 338-42,
370). More recently, Thomas H. Beeby, the
Dean of the School of Architecture at Yale
University, explained the possible symmetry
operation in a sequence of nine operations of or-
nament as: (1) translation, (2) rotation, (3) re-
flection, (4) inversion. See Thomas H. Beeby,
"The Grammar of Ornament/Ornament as
Grammar," *Via III, Ornament* (Philadelphia,
1977), illus. 1-9, 24, 25. I would like to further
thank Professor Bloomer for these two
references.

19.
Kent Bloomer,
private conversation and lectures.



Kent Bloomer and Gerald Allen, luminaire,
Central Park, New York, 1982, detail.

John Ruskin,
The Elements of Drawing,
1857, diagram of tree.



Oriental Court in 1863.¹⁵ In Jones' design a
cluster of stems acts as a surrogate for the
principal stem, a cluster radiating tangen-
tially into continuous stems outward and up-
ward like an imitative but conventional plant
in an asymmetrical radiating composition.

In dealing with the three lyrical formal
devices capable of generating a new and
modern ornament, it has been important
to bring together Owen Jones and Kent
Bloomer to demonstrate both the continuity
and the transformation of a modern style of
ornament that has its origins in theoretical
propositions deriving from nature. It is pre-
cisely the theoretical structure of conven-
tionalization that generates a modern style
because formal propositions shape the com-
position so intimately and directly. What one
discovers in Bloomer's ornament is a richer



Owen Jones, detail of ornament for the
Oriental Court, South Kensington Museum, 1863.

vocabulary of three-dimensional forms that
accord nevertheless with precepts based
largely on the graphic requirement of two-
dimensional form.

The last of Jones' four laws—the "equal
distribution" of the surface of the design, or
what Jones also called "the perfect propor-
tional distribution of the areas" of the de-

sign—is undoubtedly the most important for
the idea of conventionalization as it emerges
in the work of both Owen Jones¹⁶ and Kent
Bloomer.¹⁷ As was Jones, Bloomer is a sophis-
ticated mathematician—as ornamentalists, in
fact, need to be—and the work of both is
predicated upon an appreciation of Carte-
sian mathematics in the generation of what in
Owen Jones I call 'field theory,' and what
Bloomer refers to as the "decorative field" in
his own work. The presence of the Cartesian
field, or the diaper as it is known in orna-
ment (also called the "net" by William Mor-
ris), allows the possibility of neatly and ef-
fectively dividing the ornamental surface in
regular and equal areas which can then be
enriched in Jones' system by a further level of
ornamentation. 'Proposition 7' of the *Gram-
mar* states that: "The general forms being first
cared for, these should be subdivided and
ornamented by general lines; the interstices
may then be filled in with ornament, which
may again be subdivided and enriched for
closer inspection." So long as the general
form is first resolved, there need not be any
limit to the elaboration of the intersections
of the Cartesian grid. Mathematics thus be-
comes a link between both the ornamental
and the architectural program, leading to
fresh perceptions and the generation of new
ideas in ornament. Owen Jones' use of the
field in ceiling design confirms the richness
possible in transforming the grid from an
invisible status to an optically charged and
highly visible condition. In the upper central
design Jones has distributed secondary mini-
ature leaves from a central pod of flowers
that explodes in an orderly and symmetrical
fashion from the cove of the design. Here a
mathematical system controls the placement
of every leaf, and the subsurface of the design
is further elaborated with a tertiary system of
micro-Chinese tendrils. As Andreas Speiser
and others have pointed out,¹⁸ there are only
seventeen operations of symmetry that Jones
could have engaged in the placement of his
leaf ornament; however, because Bloomer is
engaged in three-dimensional ornament there
is a corresponding increase in the maneuvers
that he can employ—two hundred and thirty
two in all.¹⁹

In the three-dimensional grid system of
Bloomer's Indiana Landing project the dy-
namics of the third dimension are resolved
into an image of great ornamental achieve-
ment and verve (for it is also a graphic rep-
resentation of the third dimension). In the
three-dimensional field the botanic image be-
comes the ornament; here vegetation occurs
at the intersection of cubes, allowing domi-
nant space to emerge from the void. What is

important is that Bloomer has also made material the conceptual, the invisible notion of the Cartesian grid, so that the field as Owen Jones knew it has been taken one step further into the twentieth century to pronounce a materiality and factuality despite the conceptual bias of the project. Bloomer's ornament functions as a typical sign in a symbol system, referring primarily to a set of meanings rather than embodying meaning in the sign, as Owen Jones' sensationist and ideational ornament attempted.

AN ICONOGRAPHY OF PRINCIPLE

Ruskin commented on imitative ornament in "The Lamp of Beauty," writing that "the young architect should be taught to think of imitative ornament as of the extreme grace of language, not to be regarded at first, nor to be obtained at the cost of purpose, meaning, force or conciseness, yet indeed, a perfection—the least of all perfections, yet the crowning one of all."²⁰ Ruskin himself was not insensitive to the need for some degree of conventionalization in order to "seize . . . the vital truth in . . . the rendering of every natural form."²¹ He realized the complexities involved in rendering the varied and problematic forms of nature, that of the leaf in particular:

" . . . in any given leaf, besides the intricacies of its own proper shadows and foreshortenings, there are three series of circumstances which alter or hide its forms. First, shadows cast on it by other leaves,—often very forcibly. Secondly, light reflected from its lustrous surface, sometimes the blue of the sky, sometimes the white of clouds, . . . [or] other leaves, seen as darkness through the translucent parts of the leaf; a most important element of foliage effect, but wholly neglected by landscape artists in general.

The consequence of this is, that except now and then by chance, the form of a complete leaf is never seen; but a marvelous and quaint confusion, very definite, indeed, in its evidence of direction of growth, and unity of action, but wholly indefinable and inextricable, part by part, by any amount of patience. You cannot possibly work it out in facsimile, though you took a twelve month's

time to a tree; and you must therefore try to discover some mode of execution which will more or less imitate, by its variety and mystery, the variety and mystery of Nature, without absolute delineation of detail."²²

Ruskin therefore urged his drawing students of the 1850s "to the observance of characteristic points and the attainment of concise methods,"²³ and the imitatively conventionalized leaves in Jones and Bloomer accord both with 'Proposition 13' of the *Grammar* cited earlier in the text and with Ruskin's elevation of slightly conventionalized ornament from nature, namely the leaf and flower, to the highest level of ornament for architecture.

The geometric foliage of Jones and Bloomer, like the field, is never without an iconographic armature. As Bloomer has pointed out, the leaf has always symbolized and "proclaimed the power of terrestrial life, and temporality, and decay." Because it is three-dimensional and, as at Covington, Louisiana, gigantic in scale, Bloomer's leaf ornament is all the more insistently iconographic. The leaves cannot but recall the tree, which Bloomer sees as being for the Goths what was for the Greeks found in the rational geometries of Pythagoras and Euclid. One might look at John Ruskin in an effort to explain Bloomer's decision to invoke an iconography in his own ornament. Both the *Tree Domes* pergola and the trellis at Covington invoke the Tree of Life and the Sacred Grove, the source and meeting point of ancient religions. Besides the current iconology of environmental studies, which the great tree and all sunlight-turned leaves have, there is also the social psychology which Ruskin invoked in his *Elements of Drawing* of 1857. There he wrote of the "imperative requirement of each bough to stop within certain limits, expressive of its kindly fellowship and fraternity with them according to its power, magnitude, and state of health, to bring out the general perfectness of the great curve, and circumferent stateliness of the whole tree."²⁴ In a way Ruskin would have approved of, the curves of the gigantic leaves of the *Tree Domes* assist one another formally in cohering in the large ornamental pergola. Even the Gothic arches of the tectonic structure of the pergola derive, I think, from Deane and Woodward's Oxford Museum of 1854, in the design of which Ruskin was directly involved.²⁵ What stands behind the iconography of the 'stately' grove and 'shadowy' leaf is a sense of the camaraderie of nature, the fraternal 'live and let live' ideal of the communal reality that is nature. Admittedly, Darwin belied Ruskin; but even Darwin found the analogy of the tree indis-

20. John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (London, 1849), ch. IV, no. 34; in Kenneth Clark, *Ruskin Today*, 230, no. 219.

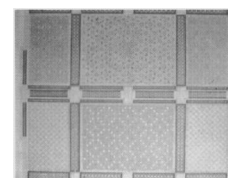
21. John Ruskin, *Elements of Drawing* (New York, 1857), 92.

22. *Ibid.*, letter I, no. 83-84; quoted in Kenneth Clark, *Ruskin Today*, 178, No. 161.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Quoted in Kenneth Clark, *Ruskin Today*, 85, No. 93.

25. Eve Blau, *Ruskinian Gothic, The Architecture of Deane and Woodward, 1845-1861* (Princeton, 1982), 48-81.



Owen Jones, ceiling design.



Kent Bloomer, trellis, Covington, Louisiana, 1985, detail.

26.
Charles Darwin,
Origin of the Species
(London, 1859), illus. 160-61, and 159-67; see
also 332-34.

27.
Ibid., 321.

28.
John Ruskin,
Modern Painters V,
part viii, ch. I, no. 4;
quoted in Kenneth Clark,
Ruskin Today,
109, no. 102.

29.
John Ruskin,
from *Val d'Arno* Lecture VI,
no. 152;
quoted in Kenneth Clark,
Ruskin Today,
109, no. 101.

pensable to a demonstration of the law of the succession of types by generation, as well as the process of extinction and the generation of new species:²⁶

"For the process of modification and the production of a number of allied forms must be slow and gradual,—one species giving rise first to two or three varieties, these being slowly converted into species, which in their turn produce by equally slow steps other species, and so on, like the branching of a great tree from a single stem, till the group becomes large."²⁷

From the age of Assyrian ornament, which employed the 'Tree of Life' in its building-scapes, to Darwin's time, the tree and its leaf were important, and what stands behind this iconography is the organic connection which life has to life, that which Ruskin referred to as 'the Law of Help.' ". . . in a plant," he wrote in *Modern Painters*, "the taking away of

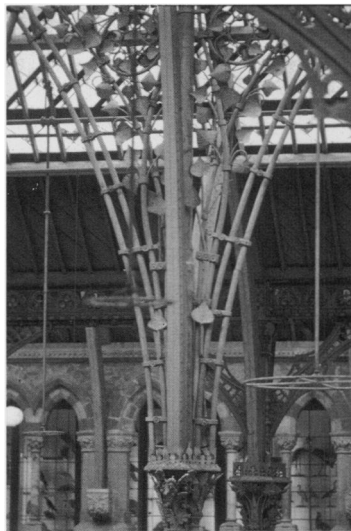
sity of life is also intensity of helpfulness. . . . The ceasing of this help is what we call corruption. . . ." ²⁸ The decay of life that is evident in the iconography of the leaf is what Darwin might have meant in these terms by extinction, but Ruskin's cooperative strategy of organic life may be more insightful than Darwin's perpetual state of competition by species.

Driving the iconography of leaf ornament are the complex social relations between organic beings, a complexity which lies outside the domain of Darwin's theory. Similarly, complex social relations of cooperation stand behind the program of architecture, as well as governmental and political psychology in general. Ruskin described the key iconological reasons for associating the social psychology of organic ornament with the science to which Darwin was committed, speaking of confused relations as being:

"Of the various states of solidity and liquidity connected with strength, or with repose; and of the duty of staying quiet in a place, or under a law, and the mischief of leaving in, being all fastened in the minds of early builders, and of the generation of men for whom

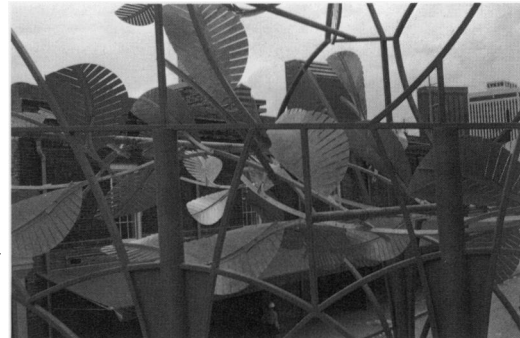


Deane and Woodward, Oxford Museum, Oxford, 1854, detail.



Deane and Woodward, Oxford Museum, Oxford, 1854, detail.

any one part does injure the rest. Hurt or remove any portion of the sap, bark, or pith, the rest is injured. . . . The power which causes the several portions of the plant to help each other, we call life. . . . Thus, inten-



Kent Bloomer, Tree Domes, Louisiana World's Exposition, New Orleans, Louisiana, 1884, detail.

they built, by the inescapable bearing of geological laws on their life."²⁹

In his development of the trellis at Covington, Bloomer followed a consciously Ruskinian strategy—a further development of the concept of miniaturization and conventionalized ornament which reveals organic laws in aesthetics—repose—and in social relations—a

law. Here the leaves stand in almost violent juxtaposition to the treescape behind, and this competition among the macrocosmic leaf, the microcosmic Y-shaped tree,³⁰ and the natural pine, sets up relations of organic law with respect to form that Ruskin approved of highly. Let Ruskin reveal just how appropriate the competition between these three elements actually is:

"I say, first there must be observance of the ruling organic law. This is the first distinction between good artists and bad artists. Your common sketcher or bad painter puts his leaves on the trees as if they were moss tied to sticks; he cannot see the lines of action or growth. . . . Therefore it is that perpetual difference, play, and change in groups of form are more essential to them even than their being subdued by some great gathering law: the law is needful to them for their perfection and their power, but the difference is needful to them for their life."³¹

The pines at Covington also set the terms of harmony in nature. Pines, as Ruskin saw them, "placed nearly always among scenes disordered and desolate, brings into them all possible elements of order and precision."³² The miniature Y-shaped trees are precisely placed and spaced in a rigorous Pythagorean manner against the tall and dense pines. Finally, Bloomer decorated his trellis with his terrestrially derived and gigantically scaled leaves exactly as Ruskin would have it in architecture: which is "to place her most exuberant vegetable ornament just where Nature would have placed it, and to give some indication of that radical and connected structure where Nature would have given it . . . they are naturally and therefore beautifully, placed."³³

THE MODERN AND THE CONVENTIONAL

For Bloomer such iconography reveals a ubiquity and commonness in life. Here Bloomer effectively straddles the dichotomy and conflicting ideals of the Victorian age to present a novel image of leaf ornament replete with its resources in the nineteenth century. And implicit in his conventionalization of the botanic image there are hopes for the future of ornament. As did Owen Jones, Bloomer argues for a modern style of ornament with which to decorate a modern architecture. Based on formal laws rather than theories of classical or naturalist imitation, conventionalization can be seen as being explicitly modern. Moreover, deriving from the work of ornament, these laws are dependent on intrinsic rather than extrinsic principles. In arguing for the modernness of authenticity

as a psychology and canon of criticism Lionel Trilling observes in his *Sincerity and Authenticity* that:

"Through the nineteenth century art has as one of its chief intentions to induce in the audience the sentiment of being, to recruit the primitive strength that a highly developed culture has diminished. To this end it proposes a variety of spiritual exercises, among which are suffering and despair and cosmic defiance; conscious sympathy with the being of others; comprehension of the processes of society; social alienation. As the century advances the sentiment of being, of being strong, is increasingly subsumed under the conception of personal authenticity. The work of art is itself authentic by reason of its entire self-definition: it is understood to exist wholly by the laws of its own being."³⁴

If for Trilling authentic art in the nineteenth century depended upon "laws of its own being," then modernism can be dated to the architecture and ornament of Victorian England from the mid-eighteen forties to its classic emergence at the Crystal Palace, decorated by Owen Jones, and to *The Grammar of Ornament* itself. Trilling argues in his book for the authenticity of the nineteenth century work of art based upon a recognizable formalism—an argument indicative of the state of modernity that culminated in an attempt with the Crystal Palace to criticize works of art and industry according to *a priori* principles of ornament. A. W. N. Pugin's Gothic principles were among the earliest expressions of this modern formalism; even Thompson, a Grecophile who opposed Pugin's position, entertained principles of architecture, ornament, and color. Principles were of the age, of its modernity; they were, for instance, the aim of Ruskin's *Seven Lamps*, where he writes of the need to "extricate . . . those large principles of right which are applicable to every stage and style of it" (architecture) and called thereby for "new forms

30. The ubiquity of the powers of growth according to iconological laws and meanings Louis Sullivan saw in the Y-shaped cotyledon, illustrated in the frontispiece of *A System of Architectural Ornament* (New York, 1924 and 1966). In the Y-shaped seed pod (common to all trees and to the Jackson trellis) Sullivan has seized upon the universality of the leaf ornament in its primal state. For a review of the leaf in Sullivan's writings, see "Ornament in Architecture," *The Engineering Magazine* (August 1892), in *Kindergarten Chats*, 189; "Emotional Architecture as Compared with Classical," *The Inland Architect and News Record*, vol. XXIV, no. 4, 32, in *Kindergarten Chats*, 191. Also see *The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York, 1924 and 1956), 39, and the unpublished "Inspirations" (1886), 10 and 15.

31. John Ruskin, *Elements of Drawing*, letter II, no. 132-33; quoted in Kenneth Clark, *Ruskin Today*, 157-59, no. 144.

32. John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* V, part VI, Ch. IX, No. 4-5; quoted in Kenneth Clark, *Ruskin Today*, 91-92.

33. John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (London, 1849), "The Lamp of Beauty," 110, no. XII.

34. Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA, 1973), 99.

35.
Ruskin,
The Seven Lamps,
"Introductory," 10.

36.
William Hubbard,
Complicity and Conviction: Steps toward an Architecture of Convention
(Cambridge, MA, 1980), 144.

37.
See Joseph Masheck,
"The Carpet Paradigm: Critical Prolegomena to
a Theory of Flatness."
Arts, 51
(Sept. 1976), 82-109.

38.
William Dyce,
"Universal Infidelity in Principles of Design,"
Journal of Design and Manufacture, VI
(London, 1851), 2. Reprint from W. Dyce
"Introduction,"
Drawing Book of the School of Design
(London, 1842-43).

and functions" of art.³⁵ By beginning the *Grammar* with a call to principles Jones effectively established conventionalism as the primary direction of his work. In 'Proposition 36' he writes that "the principles discoverable in the works of the past belong to us; not to the results. It is taking the end for the means." For Jones stylistic copyism was a cul-de-sac; his way out was eclectic, borrowing the best of forms such as the Greek anthemion for inclusion in a broadly based culling of classic motifs in ornament within a modern context. The final proposition of the *Grammar* reinforces Jones' directive that progress in art fully depends upon the complete recognition of "general principles" in ornament. One reason why the theory of the *Grammar* may be considered modern, as well as relevant to Bloomer's leaf ornament, is that the proposed form of ornament in both cases holds no formal precedent. Only the principles of the past, so generously present in Bloomer's botanic ornament, are allowable, are teachable, and discoverable in the work of art. Yet, while the work of art finds its integrity in the obviousness and conventional acceptance of its own inherent principles, history is not neglected—history is seen as a source for principles rather than as the inspiration for revivalism.

What is modern about the nineteenth century is its acceptance of history as confronting both the philosophical issues of being and becoming. The conventionalization of being stood for certain universal laws or principles, or what William Hubbard calls "generalities" in *Complicity and Conviction: Steps toward an Architecture of Convention*, writing that "forms ought to be generalized from the particulars of that situation—generalized in such a way that we could reasonably imagine ways in which those forms could be used (or adapted for use) in some other situation. But the generality should not be so great that a person couldn't imagine a tie back to those particulars."³⁶

The purpose of juxtaposing Trilling and Hubbard is to bring out the modern aspect of those laws generalized from the work of or-

nament. Both Trilling and Hubbard consider authenticity and conventionality as characteristic of modernity. Both these aspects are present in Bloomer's leaf ornament as *The Grammar of Ornament* shows; to repeat, with 'Proposition 13' of the *Grammar* Jones calls for "conventional representations . . . sufficiently suggestive to convey the intended image." What was modern about Jones in ways which Ruskin disapproved of, and modern about Kent Bloomer in ways which Ruskin would approve, is their adherence to generalizing principles without losing touch with either nature or the craft of construction. The tendency in conventionalization is ever toward abstraction (an abstraction which has had a profound impact on the art of painting);³⁷ and, since 1842, conventionalization has been regarded as an "abstractive process."³⁸ What Bloomer achieves in his conventionalization, which is contemporary in the critical sense, is to support his leaf ornament on both a formal and an iconographic philosophy. In Owen Jones' time one could be modern by following a set of formal principles which would condition ornament internally and technically. Today Bloomer has added a new strategy to the process of conventionalization of form by his insistence on the iconographic content of his ornament. Furthermore, from the nineteenth-century perspective of what is modern, Bloomer's ornament fulfills the need for ornament that is

authentic. Thus he brings to ornament a level of meaning which was a property of ancient ornament while fulfilling Richard Redgrave's canons for a 'true' (authentic) ornament:

"The true ornamentalist would seem to be the one who seeks out the principles on which the bygone artists worked, and the rules by which they arrived at excellence, and, discarding mere imitation and reproduction of details, endeavors, by the application of new ideas and new matter upon principles which he believes to be sound, or which time and the assent of other minds has proved to be fundamental, to attain originality through fitness and truth."³⁹

39.
R. Redgrave,
A Manual of Design
(London, 1887), 57.

40.
Owen Jones,
The Grammar,
155.

41.
John Ruskin,
a letter to Mrs. La Touche, 2 November 1882;
quoted in Kenneth Clark,
Ruskin Today,
115, no. 109.

Conventionalization can be associated with modernism because, despite being rooted in the formal principles and iconography of the past the ornament produced is novel in form. But what distinguishes conventionalization from novelty *per se* is the presence of a re-creative body of laws dealing with the form and meaning of ornament. The presence of theoretical issues of form and meaning alone, however, only begins to suggest an approach which may be described as modern—it is the re-creative aspect of these principles that provides for the fulfillment of this approach as it holds the possibility for further pedagogic value. Conventionalization can be taught as well as proven to exist in a work of art generated by principles, or rules, or laws. It is not surprising that ornament could take the lead in defining a modern strategy of pedagogy. Owen Jones believed that "a new style of ornament may be produced independently of a new style of architecture; and, moreover, that it would be one of the readiest means of arriving at a new style."⁴⁰ That the conventionalization of Bloomer's leaf ornament offers precisely such a strategy to contemporary architects wrestling with issues of modernity—so well subverted by the International Style—should not go unnoticed. Bloomer's leaf ornament is far-reaching because it offers the possibility of generating issues in architectural style that lie outside the conventional orthodoxy of postmodern architecture; and, it is refreshing since he invokes Ruskin throughout—he who was "simply never tired of looking at its [cyclamen] shoots of leaf against the sky, and the turning of the trunk that is the only thing in all the world that can be eccentric and graceful in the same instant, and fantastically serene."⁴¹